

Aqua man

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For 20 years, Bill Norris has searched for new sources of water as drought forced the Rio Grande Valley to plan its future in the face of booming population growth.

Today, he's a pioneer who helped develop reverse osmosis plants that convert brackish groundwater into good, clean drinking water.

Soon, he plans to help launch Texas' first seawater desalination plant on South Padre Island.

"You get forced to doing things when you're faced with a drought," said Norris of NRS Consulting Engineers in Harlingen.

In the mid 1980s, drought led Norris to believe the region's reserve of salty groundwater could become part of its water supply. Reverse osmosis plants could convert brackish groundwater into "bottle-quality water," he believed.

"We pushed the envelope a little bit," he said. "We like to think outside the box."

By the 1990s, a long drought had helped turn many into believers.

"I love when people say it can't be done because it drives me even stronger," Norris said with a chuckle.

In Rancho Viejo in 1998, Norris unveiled a \$720,000 reverse osmosis plant that each day converts 250,000 gallons of brackish groundwater into drinking water.

"We basically proved this is not a very expensive process," he said.

Last year in Willacy County, Norris developed a \$2 million plant that supplies the North Alamo Water Supply Corp. with 1 million gallons of water a day for customers from Port Mansfield to Lasara.

The same year in Brownsville, he developed a \$22 million plant that pumps 7.5 million gallons a day for the Southmost Regional Water Authority.

This year, his projects stretch across the Valley.

On the region's eastern edge, he's working on a \$5 million plant that will convert 2 million gallons of groundwater a day as part of a joint project with the North Alamo Water Supply Corp., the East Rio Hondo Water Supply Corp. and the city of Primera.

Toward the west, he's working on two \$5 million projects for the North Alamo Water Supply Corp. and the city of Edinburg that will each convert 3 million gallons of groundwater into drinking water.

"We probably have the most experience of anybody in Texas with brackish water desalination," he said. "We pretty much developed this."

This year, Norris plans to branch out into seawater desalination.

Now he's working on a feasibility study to develop the first seawater desalination plant in Texas - a multi-million dollar plant on South Padre Island that would convert 1 million gallons of sea water into drinking water.

"If we can diversity our water supply with alternative sources, I firmly believe we can make a large impact on the water supply for the long term," he said.



Christy Espinosa/Valley Morning Star
Bill Norris of NRS Consulting Engineers in Harlingen has been instrumental in developing plants that turn brackish water into drinking water. His next project is to build a desalination plant on South Padre Island.

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